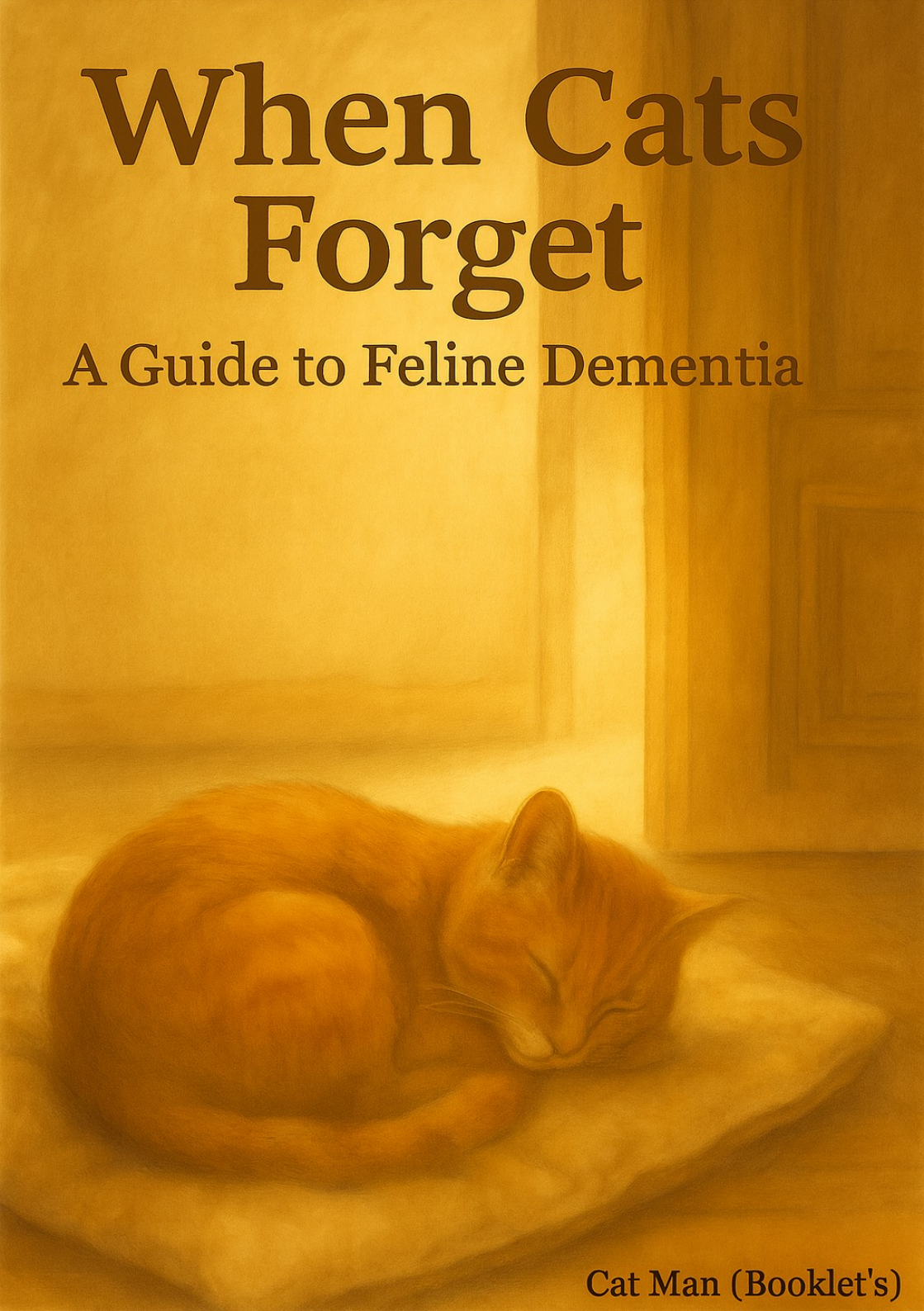
When Cats Forget

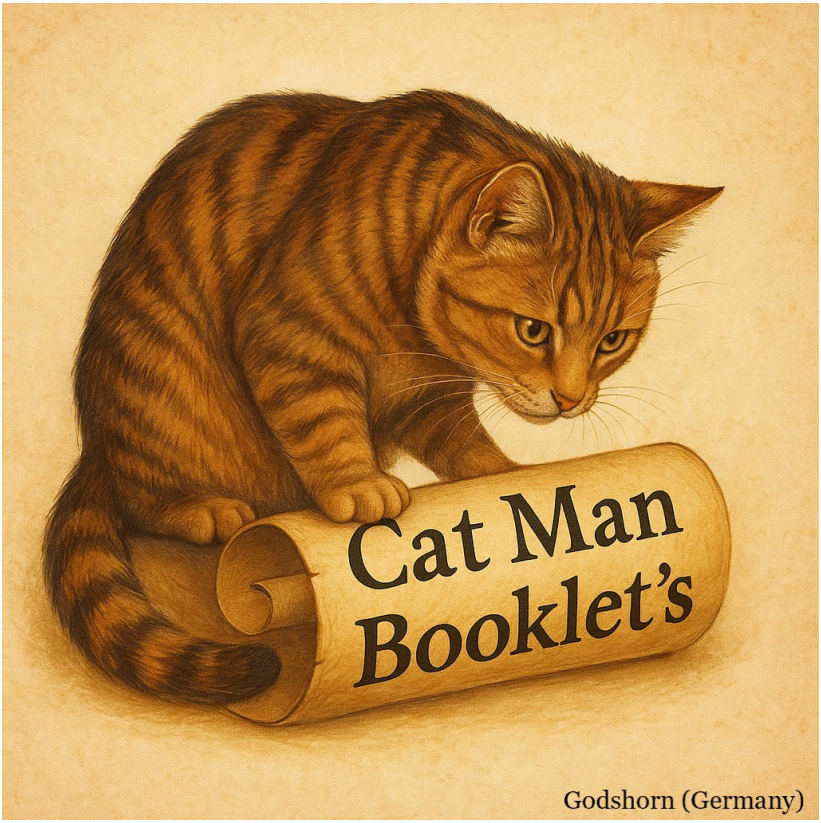
A Guide to Feline Dementia



Cat Man (Booklet's)

When Cats Forget

A Guide to Feline Dementia



Senior cat in warm light

Chapter 1
What Is Feline Dementia?
Basics and First Orientation

Feline dementia, medically called cognitive dysfunction, is a progressive disease of the brain that primarily affects older cats. Nerve cells, the connections between them, and important neurotransmitter systems gradually change over time. As a result, the cat slowly loses certain cognitive abilities, similar to how older humans experience dementia.

Many changes at first appear to be “normal aging.” But when memory, orientation, behavior, or sleep patterns become persistently disrupted, it is no longer typical aging. It becomes a medical condition that should be recognized and evaluated by a veterinarian.

What matters is this:
Feline dementia is not simply an old cat “acting strange.”

It is a medical disorder in which the brain gradually sustains damage.

Although the condition cannot be cured, its progression can often be slowed significantly. The earlier the first signs are noticed and medically evaluated, the better the cat’s quality of life can be preserved.

Symbolic representation of brain changes

Chapter 2
Why Do Cats Develop Dementia? Causes and Changes in the Brain

Feline dementia develops through several age-related changes in the brain that progress slowly but steadily. Many of these processes resemble what is known in human medicine about dementia and Alzheimer's disease, though without the same extent or the typical plaques found in humans.

The most important changes are:

1. **Loss of nerve cells and synapses**
   As cats age, brain cells lose energy, structure, and functional capacity. Not only individual nerve cells die—particularly critical is the loss of synapses, the connecting points between cells.
   Fewer synapses mean poorer information processing, slower reactions, and difficulties with learning and memory. The brain becomes, quite literally, "quieter."

2. **Reduced blood flow**
   In older cats, blood circulation and oxygen supply to the brain diminish. Less oxygen means less energy, and nerve cells are naturally extremely energy-dependent.
   Consequences include tiredness, slowed mental processes, and fluctuations in orientation.

3. **Inflammatory processes in the brain**
   Aging leads to a persistent, low-grade inflammatory tendency. Microglial cells—the "maintenance cells" of the brain—become oversensitive and eventually begin to clear away healthy structures.
   This process, known as neuroinflammatory aging, plays a major role in the progression of dementia.

4. **Oxidative stress**
   Over time, cells accumulate harmful oxygen compounds that damage nerve structures and accelerate aging.
   Antioxidants such as vitamin E or omega-3 fatty acids can later be useful as supportive therapy.

5. **Protein deposits in the brain**
   Cats also accumulate certain proteins in the brain as they age, which can impair nerve cell function. These processes resemble aspects of Alzheimer's disease but are less pronounced in cats.

6. **Hormonal and metabolic changes**
   The entire metabolism ages as well. Disorders of the thyroid, kidneys, or blood sugar regulation can place additional strain on the brain and worsen symptoms.

This is why veterinary evaluation is so important: Often, dementia is not the only issue but part of a combination of problems.

Disorientation in everyday life

Chapter 3
Early Warning Signs
How to Recognize Feline Dementia

Typical signs in everyday life
Cats are good at hiding illness, and many owners initially think, “She’s just getting old.”
But feline dementia shows specific patterns that clearly differ from normal aging.
The following signs are among the most important early indicators.

1. **Disorientation**
   The cat suddenly appears “lost,” for example:
   • standing in a room without knowing what to do next
   • walking in the wrong direction
   • staring into space for extended periods
   • stopping in unusual places
   She knows her own home, but sometimes she can no longer navigate it properly.

2. **Changes in sleep-wake rhythm**
   A very typical sign includes:
   • loud meowing or restlessness at night
   • excessive sleep during the day
   • “day-night reversal”
   The internal clock becomes disrupted.

3. **Altered social behavior**
   A previously affectionate cat may suddenly seem distant, or a formerly independent cat may constantly seek closeness.
   Typical examples include:
   • less greeting at the door
   • unusual clinginess
   • withdrawal from humans or other cats

4. **Litter box problems**
   This is a very common sign of cognitive changes.
   Possible observations include:
   • forgetting where the litter box is
   • entering the box but eliminating beside it
   • restlessness near the box without using it
   • sudden urination in unusual locations
   Important: rule out medical causes first (e.g., bladder, kidney issues, pain).

5. **Changes in eating behavior**
   The cat appears confused while eating or forgets to eat at times:
   • cannot find the food bowl
   • sniffs food but does not eat
   • walks restlessly around the feeding area
   • “forgets” that she has already eaten
   Some cats may also eat more frequently because memory declines.

6. **Loud, seemingly “purposeless” vocalizing Especially at night.**
   This vocalizing is caused by:
   • disorientation
   • fear
   • disrupted day-night rhythm
   • insecurity or stress
   Owners often describe it as “she’s calling for someone.”

7. **Slower responsiveness**
   The cat reacts more slowly to:
   • being addressed
   • touch
   • sounds
   • familiar routines
   She appears mentally absent or distracted.

8. **Reduced play and exploration**
   Interest in toys, movement, and the environment decreases.
   The cat appears more passive or sluggish—not because of pain, but mentally.

Restlessness at night

Chapter 4
Diagnosis: How Does the Veterinarian Determine Whether It Is Dementia?

Examinations, differential diagnoses, and what truly matters Feline dementia cannot be proven with a single test.

Diagnosis always involves exclusion, observation, and a thorough veterinary examination.

It is important to understand that many other diseases cause similar symptoms—so these must be ruled out first.

1. **Detailed owner interview**
   The most important part of the diagnosis is your observation at home.
   The veterinarian will ask about:
   • behavioral changes
   • sleep-wake rhythm
   • orientation
   • vocalizing
   • litter box habits
   • eating habits
   • social behavior
   The more precise the description, the easier it is to assess the situation.

2. **Physical examination**
   The veterinarian evaluates:
   • heart and circulation
   • breathing
   • mobility
   • pain sensitivity
   • neurological reflexes
   • vision and hearing
   Many signs that look like dementia can actually be caused by physical problems.

3. **Blood test – the most important exclusion tool**
   Many illnesses can mimic dementia symptoms, such as:
   • hyperthyroidism
   • kidney disease
   • diabetes
   • liver disorders
   • vitamin B12 deficiency
   • electrolyte imbalances
   • inflammation or infection
   This is why a full blood panel plus organ profile is essential.

4. **Blood pressure measurement**
   High blood pressure is a frequent cause of neurological abnormalities, especially in older cats. It can lead to:
   • disorientation
   • restlessness
   • visual disturbances
   • headaches (stressful for cats)

5. **Urinalysis**
   It shows whether the kidneys or other metabolic processes are impaired and influencing behavior.

6. **Imaging diagnostics (optional)**
   Not always necessary, but helpful if other causes must be ruled out:
   • ultrasound (organs)
   • X-ray (for example, spine)
   • CT/MRI (less common but possible)
   These can reveal tumors, severe circulatory issues, or structural changes.

7. **Evaluation using DISHA criteria**
   Veterinarians often use the DISHA scale to classify symptoms:
   • Disorientation
   • Interaction changes
   • Sleep-wake cycle
   • House-soiling
   • Activity or anxiety changes
   The more areas involved, the more likely a cognitive dysfunction.

8. **Diagnosis by exclusion**
   Only when all other diseases have been ruled out and the behavioral changes fit the typical pattern is the diagnosis made:
   Cardiovascular- or inflammation-related cognitive dysfunction (“feline dementia”).

Gentle veterinary examination

Food with daily medication

Chapter 5
Treatment: How Can You Help Your Cat? Medical Therapy, Daily Support, and Effective Assistance

Feline dementia cannot be cured, but it is very treatable. The goal of therapy is always to slow cognitive decline, reduce anxiety, improve orientation, and maintain quality of life.

Treatment works best when three components are combined.

1. **Medical treatment by the veterinarian**
   a) Medications to improve blood flow
   These medications increase oxygen and energy supply in the brain.
   They are especially helpful for:
   • disorientation
   • nighttime restlessness
   • slowed responses
   Many cats respond very well to them.

b) Medications targeting inflammatory processes in the brain

Because dementia often progresses due to chronic inflammation, specific products can help stabilize the nervous system.
They may reduce stress and slow progression.

c) Nutritional supplements supporting brain function

Common recommendations include:

• omega-3 fatty acids (DHA/EPA)
• antioxidants (vitamin E, vitamin C, selenium)
• B vitamins
• SAMe (S-adenosylmethionine)

These support cellular energy and protect nerve structures.

d) Special diets for older cats

“Brain health” diets typically include:

• omega-3 fatty acids
• antioxidants
• L-carnitine
• arginine
• taurine

These nutrients may help stabilize cognitive function.

e) Supportive therapies depending on underlying conditions

Many senior cats have additional issues:

• kidney disease
• hyperthyroidism
• high blood pressure
• arthritis

Treating these conditions reduces strain on the brain.

2. **Daily support at home**
   This is the part of therapy owners can influence the most.

a) Consistent routines
Cats with dementia rely on predictability. Helpful strategies include:
• consistent feeding times
• stable furniture arrangement
• clear daily structure
• calm resting areas
Routine provides a sense of security.

b) Orientation aids
For disorientation, useful aids include:
• small night-lights
• easily accessible food and water
• additional litter boxes
• low, reachable sleeping spots
• ramps for older cats
These reduce confusion and help the cat navigate its environment.

c) Gentle enrichment
Short, calm activities help keep the brain engaged:
• slow, simple play
• puzzle feeders
• search games
• watching outside together
Avoid overstimulation—better short and frequent than long and intense.

d) Stress reduction
Stress accelerates dementia. Important measures include:
• a quiet environment
• avoiding sudden changes
• multiple resting places
• safe hiding spots
Pheromones can help when needed.

3. **Support from the owner**
   a) Patience and understanding
   The cat is not being stubborn.
   She is struggling to process information.

b) Improving safety in the home
Recommended measures:
• securing windows
• covering dangerous spots
• making slippery stairs less slick

c) Nighttime support
Many cats vocalize at night. Helpful strategies include:
• calm reassurance
• leaving a light on
• sleeping in the same room
• establishing a stable nighttime routine

d) Regular veterinary checkups
At least every 3–6 months, since dementia progresses slowly and treatment may need adjustment.

Elevated senior feeding station

Chapter 6
Living With a Cat With Dementia
Daily Life, Communication, and Quality of Life

Caring for a cat with dementia is a balance of support, observation, and patience.

Many owners experience ups and downs, but with the right adjustments, a cat can live very comfortably despite cognitive decline.

1. **When the cat does not "recognize" you**
   Dementia can sometimes cause the cat to:
   • look at you briefly and walk away
   • not immediately understand who you are
   • startle easily
   • suddenly seek or avoid closeness
   This is not a lack of affection—it is a moment of confusion.
   Helpful approaches include:
   • speaking softly
   • approaching gently
   • signaling your presence beforehand (for example, by using your voice)
   • avoiding sudden touch from behind

2. **Maintaining shared rituals**
   Rituals provide structure.
   Examples include:
   • daily petting sessions
   • sitting together at the window
   • evening feeding routines
   • short play moments
   Even as cognitive decline progresses, emotional bonds and established habits often remain intact for a long time.

3. **When the cat suddenly cries or yowls**
   Nighttime vocalizing is one of the most stressful symptoms.
   Possible causes include:
   • disorientation
   • fear
   • searching for the caregiver
   • reversed sleep rhythm
   Helpful strategies include:
   • dim night lighting
   • calm reassurance
   • sleeping in the same room
   • calming pheromones
   • a consistent nighttime routine

4. **When litter box issues appear**
   The cat is not eliminating outside the box to misbehave—she is confused or overwhelmed.
   Helpful measures include:
   • multiple litter boxes
   • low entrance edges
   • familiar litter types
   • well-lit locations
   • litter boxes on every floor
   • easier access (no climbing)

5. **Supporting eating and drinking behavior**
   Some cats:
   • cannot find the food bowl
   • forget to eat
   • wander around as if searching
   • appear “restlessly hungry”
   Helpful strategies include:
   • multiple water stations
   • shallow bowls
   • clearly visible feeding areas
   • warm, aromatic food
   • small meals offered several times a day

6. **Managing anxiety**
   Dementia increases insecurity. Helpful approaches include:
   • avoiding loud noises
   • moving gently
   • providing hiding spaces
   • using familiar scents
   • offering consistent affection
   Some cats benefit from:
   • pheromone diffusers
   • calming supplements
   • soft background music

7. **When things become more difficult**
   Advanced dementia may show as:
   • constant disorientation
   • severely disrupted sleep patterns
   • minimal reaction to surroundings
   • refusal to eat
   • constant wandering
   • pronounced litter box confusion
   Veterinary support becomes especially important during this stage.
   Sometimes the veterinarian may recommend additional medication for calming or support.

Soothing gentle petting

Chapter 7
What Happens Next?
Progression, Prognosis, and Saying Goodbye

Feline dementia progresses slowly but steadily.
Many cats live for years after diagnosis if their environment, care, and medical support are adapted to their needs.
The course varies greatly—some remain stable for a long time, while others decline more quickly.

1. **Typical progression**
   The condition generally develops in three phases:

Early phase
• mild disorientation
• nighttime restlessness
• changes in social behavior
• occasional forgetfulness
Often difficult to distinguish from normal aging.

Middle phase
• noticeable sleep-wake disturbances
• frequent vocalizing
• litter box issues
• confusion in familiar surroundings
• increased withdrawal or excessive clinginess
At this stage, owners usually realize that “something is wrong.”

Late phase
• severe disorientation
• minimal reaction to environmental stimuli
• incontinence or complete litter box confusion
• feeding difficulties despite appetite
• increasing fear or restlessness
This stage requires significant support and veterinary guidance.

2. **How long can a cat with dementia live?**
   With good care:
   • often several years after diagnosis
   • usually with a good quality of life
   • many cats do not die from dementia but from other age-related diseases
   The most important factor is always quality of life, not lifespan.

3. **When is it time to talk to the veterinarian?**
   At the latest when you notice:
   • constant fear or restlessness
   • ongoing refusal to eat
   • lack of rest or sleep
   • uncontrolled nighttime wandering
   • severe distress behaviors
   • little or no response to affection
   A veterinarian can help relieve symptoms or discuss what is best for the cat.

4. **When the final stage approaches**
   It is one of the hardest moments, but important to remember:
   You have given your cat a good life.
   You stayed by her side, supported her, and understood her.
   She was never “alone” in her confusion.
   You were her anchor of safety—until the very end.
   Many owners describe that cats with dementia are especially grateful for closeness, even when they cannot always show it.

5. **Memories and peace**
   After saying goodbye, what remains is often:
   • gratitude
   • relief that you were able to help
   • many quiet, beautiful memories
   Dementia changes many things, but not this:
   The bond between a cat and her human remains.

Safe, familiar resting place

Chapter 8
Summary for a Quick Overview

Feline dementia is an age-related disease of the brain in which nerve cells, connections, and metabolic processes gradually deteriorate.
The condition is not curable, but it is very treatable. With proper support, affected cats can remain stable and content for a long time.

Most important signs
• disorientation
• changes in social behavior
• nighttime vocalizing
• day-night reversal
• litter box issues
• reduced activity
• altered eating behavior

Veterinary diagnosis
• detailed owner interview
• physical examination
• full blood panel and organ values
• blood pressure measurement
• urinalysis
• imaging if needed
• DISHA scale assessment
Dementia is diagnosed only after all other causes have been excluded.

Treatment
• medications to improve blood flow
• anti-inflammatory support
• omega-3s, antioxidants, B vitamins, SAMe
• senior-appropriate “brain health” diets
• treatment of additional illnesses

Home support
• consistent routines
• night-lights
• additional, easily accessible litter boxes
• calm environment and low stress
• short, gentle activity sessions
• increasing household safety
• patient, calm communication

Progression
• gradual decline over months or years
• early, middle, and late phases
• emotional bonds remain strong for a long time

Goal of care
A cat with dementia should feel:
• safe
• oriented
• well-rested
• well cared for
• free of fear
• connected to her human

With patience, structure, and veterinary support, a cat with dementia can live a good, dignified, and peaceful life.

Evening view from the window

For your notes

For your notes

Cat Man (Booklet's)